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ABSTRACT

A three-year study is testing the hypothesis that learning about American minority ethnic literature produces grief, and is assessing the effects of changing the teaching and content of the course to make the best possible use of those feelings. Classroom experience in teaching a consistently popular course in minority literature revealed unusual classroom difficulties, resulting in the hypothesis that students were experiencing intense psychological responses involving the typical forms of grief: anger, sorrow, bargaining, guilt, and denial. In the fall of 1987, preliminary data was gathered through an informal protocol (freewriting about the class) several times during the quarter. Evidence of the various forms of grief can be seen in these student writing samples. In the fall of 1988, a more formal protocol instrument was administered six times during the quarter. These protocols will be assessed by trained readers, and the results evaluated using non-parametric statistical methods. Two hypotheses will be tested: (1) expressions of grieving behavior change in relation to the content of a course; and (2) students move toward acceptance and preparation for social action by the end of the course. In the fall of 1989, if results warrant this change, students in the course will be told about its psychological dimensions and will be encouraged to assess their feelings in those terms. The course has had useful secondary effects, inspiring various forms of activism as well as resulting in students taking far more control over their education. The grief resulting from ethnic literature classes probably reflects a positive process of growth. (SR)

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Grieving in the Ethnic Literature Classroom

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Ecclesiastes wrote that "in much learning is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow." My colleagues and I are now carrying out a three year project to assess the extent to which learning--particularly learning about American ethnic history and literature--does in fact produce grief.

The first few times I taught a course in minority literature, I found myself facing classroom difficulties I had never before encountered. Some of those difficulties were due to my lack of preparation to teach the subject, but many of the problems I faced originated with the students. They resisted the information I presented, denied that racial problems existed, bargained with the facts, and presented me with curious bimodal course evaluations that suggested that the students were torn. One student, for example, raised his hand during the midst of my discussion of the "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" to comment that his pastor had preached that Dr. King was an adulterer. This, to my mind, was a kind of bargaining. I could lecture about Gandhi, King, Anders Nygren, Paul Tillich, non-violence, and faith development, but the student reserved the right to balance my Dr. King against that other man, the sinner.

Since the students' work was up to their usual standards, and since they enrolled in increasing numbers each year, always pushing past the established course limits, I knew that the class was not disliked. Instead, I hypothesized that I was observing an intense psychological response to the material, and because I was seeing anger, sorrow, bargaining, guilt, and denial in various forms, I hypothesized that my students were grieving.

While Kubler-Ross' initial work in On Death and Dying (1969) was the basis on my diagnosis, the grief in my classroom, if it is grief, is not the same as grief over death. This grief over history, over the death of innocence, over the death--perhaps--of my students' notions of the American dream, this grief is not as intense or long-lasting as grief over the death of a close loved one. Grief over history seems to be an intermittent phenomenon that is even deliberately courted by students as a challenge to met. Nor does this form of grief follow any prescribed pattern from denial to final acceptance, as Kubler-Ross suggested in her early work. As one of my colleagues in this research implies, it is better to conceptualize this experience as a beehive of emotions that the student enters, leaves, and enters again as part of a long process of learning and coping. This grief, however, does manifest itself in the same feelings that are typical of grief over the loss of a loved one.

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My associates and I are now in the midst of a three year experiment to assess this phenomenon and to change the teaching

and content of the class in order to make the best possible use of the feelings that are liberated by studying America's past. I am joined in this work by Martin Abbott, of the SPU Sociology Department, by a local theologian, and by a specialist in psychiatry at the University of Washington Medical School. Because we have found nothing in the literature that directly bears on our question, we have chosen to carry out a study both to test the hypothesis that students grieve and to assess the effects of changing the course.

In the fall of 1987, we gathered preliminary data by administering an informal protocol several times during the quarter. In fall 1988, we administered a more formal protocol instrument six times during the quarter and used two additional forms of evaluation to provide us with contextual information. The additional evaluation methods included traditional course evaluation forms and a classroom intervention by two evaluators trained in using small groups to assess classes. In fall 1989, if the results warrant this change, we will tell the students about the psychological dimensions of the course a the beginning of the term, and we will encourage students to assess their feelings in terms of what we have found in other classes. This approach--anticipating and literally pre-venting conflict--is used successfully by one of our consultants in teaching a controversial course in medicine.

What constitutes evidence of student grief? Here are some examples from the 1987 protocols. These documents provided us with enough confirmation of our hypothesis to continue the more formal experiment.

These excerpts are taken from protocols written at the end of the fifth week of class. The class had just come to the end of the unit on black American literature and history. They had seen the entire "Eyes on the Prize" series, a film about the death of a Florida NAACP leader, and a documentary about Amos 'N Andy. They had read Up From Slavery, Black Boy, The Autobiography of Malcolm X, Why We Can't Wait, a handout of selected poetry, and a collection of short stories by Seattle author Charles Johnson, The Sorcerer's Apprentice. Johnson himself had come to speak at an evening lecture, and two additional black speakers had made presentations, one on black history and the other on his teenage experiences in Birmingham in 1963. Here are the student reactions.

A. Well, to start off, I am not a happy camper! In fact, I am ticked off beyond words. ... Every day when I leave this class, my mind is so full of anger and sadness that at times I cannot even speak in fear of exploding. ... I have to say, some of the people in this class drive me crazy. Their remarks are so amazingly ignorant.

This student's anger at fellow students is a common finding. The second excerpt directs concern both at the instructor and at classmates.

B. I would like to express my views or argue with people a bit, but some people get so violent. I know this one guy who harrassed a girl for a few days after the Black Boy discussion and pinned her against a wall until she told him what her views were. I also feel that if I said something, you might make fun of me, like you sometimes do, or someone might jump down my throat.

The third excerpt displays a typical form of bargaining:

C. There's this one lady in this class who always speaks so madly about her black past and about women's rights. Why doesn't she just take a deep breath, smile, and be thankful for the life and freedom she has?

Equally common is bargaining by blaming the South:

D. I can't comprehend the kind of atrocity occurring in our "advanced" culture. And then to think that the white students, parents, and politicians in the Eyes on the Prize series are still alive...still voting, you know that the hatred can't be snuffed out as easily as a candle, especially in the South where it seems so ingrained.

Or bargaining with denial:

E. Before I just assumed that sooner or later they'd catch up or that maybe they were just victims of their environment, or culture, or even that they wanted it that way. (How awful that sounds.)

Or the anger of the black student, one out of only six that year in a class of fifty-seven students. (SPU's black population is only 1%.)

F. Being black and in this classroom I realize I should be a little irritated by the attitude of some of my fellow students. And I am. I'm irritated every time someone suggests that they know how blacks feel about racial tension, social freedom and writing. How can they know what it was/is like to be black in the south, controlled by whites. This class is clueless and blind, yet they have the audacity to suggest there is no real tension or that racial tension can be transcended, or things are really getting better. Obvioiusly they don't see the swastikas painted on the public walls on Queen Anne hill [near campus]. Obviously they don't see the decline in black enrollment in schools of higher education. The list goes on of social strife in their neighborhood that they are ignorant of. And yet they claim to be be "concerned." At least today they are "concerned." But what about tomorrow when they isolate themselves once more? How far does their "concern" go? Their "concern" seldom makes a difference.

All of these responses were essentially free-writing exercises. Students were asked merely to write about the class. The next year, in 1988, we administered a first day questionnaire and then used the same protocol form five times during the quarter. Each time students were asked to comment on the following general questions. They had about fifteen minutes to write, and typically they produced between one paragraph and two pages.

> At this point in the quarter, what do you feel or think about the content of the course, the instructor (or teaching), your classmates, the workload, or any other thoughts or concerns. What have you done recently in terms of ethnic relations?

Each student was asked to create and use the same four digit code on every protocol, so that the evaluators can assess changes in individual students. Students were told that their responses were anonymous; each set of responses was sealed in a large envelope at the end of the writing session, and the students were told that the envelopes would not be opened until the quarter was over and grades were posted. Soon, these protocols will be assessed by a properly-trained cadre of readers, and the results will be evaluated using non-parametric statistical methods.

We have formulated two broad hypotheses that will be tested. Our general objective is to sensitize racial consciousness and to prepare to mobilize that consciousness into positive social action.

Hypothesis 1 is that expressions of grieving behavior change in relation to the content of a course. An operational expansion of that hypothesis is that students' often hostile or stubborn responses to learning about ethnic history may be accurately and usefully interpreted in terms of Kubler-Ross' categories of grieving behaviors.

Hypothesis 2 is that students move toward acceptance and preparation for social action by the end of the term. An operational extension of this hypothesis is that course components can be designed that will help students not only to identify and cope with the developmental and affective dimensions of confronting American ethnic history and literature, but also that their expressions of emotion will gradually be characterized by the more positive emotions of anger, sorrow and acceptance, while expressions of guilt, denial, and bargaining will decline.

So far, we have some initial confirmation of the hunch that students actually grieve over their learning. A non-scientific assesment of the first year's protocols (1987 cohort) indicated that the studens expressed significantly different feelings and thoughts as the quarter proceeded. If we can bracket together denial, bargaining, and guilt and call those three somewhat negative and withdrawn coping strategies, and if we then can bracket anger, sorrow, and acceptance as more positive coping strategies, we observed the following. The levels of denial,

bargaining, and guilt held level throughout the unit on black American literature, but the expressions of anger and sorrow increased from a frequency of 34% of the class to 65%. And by the end of the quarter, expressions of bargaining declined, as did anger and sorrow, while expressions of acceptance nearly doubled. It is too early, though, to make much of this. Perhaps acceptance is a common feeling at the end of any course. At some point, we hope to run a control group in a more politically neutral literature course.

There have also been some useful secondary effects of the experiment. This class has always inspired some level of activism, from the formation of the first black students' organization on campus to the assembly of teams to work with the Mendenhall Ministries in Mississippi. The 1987 crop of activists focused on the local situation by lobbying successfully to place the student government's surplus funds into a trust account for minority scholarships. Since protocols have been introduced to the classroom, however, the students have taken far more control of their own education. They have arranged for speakers, have confronted one another, and have provided far more feedback to the instructor. Students are also making fewer requests for "grope sessions" or "confessional hours" where they can let their racial feelings hang out. My mentor in this course warned me against the negative consequences of such events, even though the occasional black student suggests that disucssions of that kind might be productive. The process of writing protocols, however, has apparently helped students to cope privately with their emotions and to feel more comfortable in the classroom.

How can I conclude when we don't know the conclusion? I think we can say this much. Ethnic literature courses do in fact produce grief. Instructors can take comfort from the fact that affective problems associated with teaching minority literature are neither entirely the intructors' fault nor even unfortunate. This kind of grief probably reflects a positive process of growth--moral growth, growth in faith, growth in citizenship. I suspect, too, that bimodal patterns in course evaluations can be partially accounted for by these processes. We hope that the course will run more smoothly, and that learning will improve, when we add an introductory lecture and discussion that directly informs students about these phenomena.

I know more specifically now how "he who increases knowledge increases sorrow." But I can also affirm, with many others, that "suffering breeds character."

(version of March 1989)